Gender in the Renaissance

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The Wrestling Scene from 'As You Like It', painted by Francis Hayman, c.1740–2. This painting is a depiction of Shakespeare's play, which encompasses aspects of gender.

During the Renaissance, concepts of gender and gender roles remained similar to those of the medieval period.[1] The Renaissance brought a renewal and rebirth of intellect, culture, and the arts,[2] but just as these advancements only served the rich, they also only only served men.

Women existed solely for the benefits of men, as daughters were expected to help the family by marrying a more privileged man, and the purpose of wives was managing the household and bearing children to work the farm (if a peasant family) or simply to continue the family line.[3] The only purpose marriage had was to produce sons,[4] since sons were the only ones who could carry out what were seen as the most important functions of society. Another reason why sons were favoured was because daughters were expensive to raise, because they had to provide a dowry,[5] so lower class families favoured sons that could also serve as farmhands.

Because women were only seen for the purposes of marrying and having children, they conformed to traditional gender roles and enjoyed very few economic, legal, or political rights, as they were submissive to their fathers or husbands.[6] Overall, women's behavior was regulated by men for the purpose of maintaining social control,[7] so that men could keep their privileges in society.

Although the Renaissance was defined by its great advancements in artistic techniques, from a modern perspective the portrayal of women was largely stereotypical.[8] Leading figures of the Renaissance showed women not unlike how they were portrayed during the medieval period, as either virtuous and chaste or seductive and deceptive, using iconic images from Catholicism such as Virgin Mary and Eve.[9] The cultural and political developments that emerged from the Renaissance continued neglecting women,[10] as can be seen from the stereotypes of the time that were reflected in art.

The role of women as inferior to men began to change, as women took a slightly larger role in social life, however they were still expected to take care of the house and children.[11] But even though some of the portrayals of women were reminiscent of medieval thinking, attitudes towards women began to slowly improve, especially through literature.[12] Renaissance women also had greater freedom of movement, and were also expected to have a will of their own and be able to form opinions; in these ways, their freedoms were not quite as restricted compared to the medieval era.[13] However, they still could not wield power directly, though some women of the Renaissance era were often referred to as the "power behind the throne", for they still influenced their husband's decisions.[14]

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